

Islam and Cultural Identity in Europe

Student Reading

Why Study Global Media Perspectives?

The global media play an essential role in the process of economic and cultural globalization. Today people in France can view commentary from the United States by logging on to MSNBC or The Onion while people in the United States view French perspectives by connecting to the Agence France-Presse homepage or by viewing a video made by a young person from France. Whenever we read a webpage, watch a YouTube video, glance at a magazine cover or listen to a podcast. We are taking in messages about the world. These mediated messages are constructed for particular purposes, they come from a point of view, and they use certain techniques to influence the viewer, reader or listener. Our ability to make good choices depends on our ability to critically analyze and evaluate the media messages we receive.

The Islamic veil across Europe

The word hijab comes from the Arabic word for veil and is usually used to describe the headscarves worn by Muslim women. Governments across Europe are debating whether Muslim women should be allowed to wear the hijab in school or in the workplace. In recent years this debate has taken place in courtrooms, across the dinner table and especially in the media throughout the continent, raising issues of religious freedom, female equality, secular traditions and even fears of terrorism.

Islam's holy book, the Koran, considered by many Muslims to be the literal word of God, instructs both male and female Muslims to dress modestly. For men this means covering the area from the navel to the knee. For women (in the presence of men they are not related to) it is often interpreted as covering everything except their face, hands and feet. Islamic scholars debate as to the specific meaning of modest dress as defined in the Koran.

The Hijab in France, Turkey, Spain and Great Britain

France has the largest Muslim population in Western Europe, estimated in 2004 at 5 - 6.5 million people or somewhere between 8-10% of the total French population according to the French government. Most of the French Muslim population has ancestry in the former North African colonies of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Though many Muslims living in France are French citizens, the growth of the Muslim community has strained the French principle of *laïcité*, or the strict separation of church and state. A 2004 ban on "conspicuous" religious symbols in public schools was interpreted by many in France as a ban on the hijab.

In Turkey roughly 99% of the population is Muslim, though the Turkish state is secular or non-religious in orientation. When Turkey applied to join the European Union in 2006 some representatives wondered whether a poor Muslim country could fit in, in turn causing some in Turkey to wonder if the European Union was merely a "Christian club." Due to its commitment to secularism Turkey has held to a longstanding ban on the wearing of headscarves in civic spaces, including schools, universities and official buildings. A law proposed by the Turkish parliament in 2008 to loosen the headscarf restriction was struck down by the Turkish high court.

Spain has a strong Islamic legacy due to almost 800 years of Moorish rule ending in 1492. Recent immigration of Moroccan workers has brought the Muslim population of Spain to over one million or about 2.3% of the total population. In 2008 Spain's Equality Minister criticized the wearing of the hijab, as "a violation of human rights" that "promoted inequality" among Muslim men and women. She was widely criticized for her remarks by Spanish

Muslim representatives who said that she should not talk about what she "didn't know about".

According to the 2001 census Great Britain's 1.6 million Muslim's make up 2.8% of the population. Great Britain's Muslim population is very young, 1/3 under the age of 16, and very diverse in country of origin, with Muslim communities from East Africa, South Asia and the Middle East. The British government supports multiculturalism and has no laws banning Islamic dress.

Questioning Media Perspectives Wherever You See Them

Whenever we receive media reporting, it is always important to ask these key questions: Who produced this media document and for what purpose? Who might benefit from this media construction and who might be hurt? How credible is this information and what is left out that might be helpful to know? Consider these questions as you explore the material in the following lesson.



Still-shot from "Nasheed -Free" British music video



Homepage from [Anatolian Storms](#) Turkish blog

Compare the different messages about the hijab in these European media documents.

How might each reflect Muslim attitudes about the hijab in Britain and Turkey?